Book Review

Esoterism as Principle and as Way, by Frithjof Schuon

Translated by William Stoddart
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"It might be objected", says the author, "that it is contradictory to speak in public of things that are so precarious from the point of view of intelligibility; we would reply once again with the Kabbalists that it is better that wisdom should be divulged than that it should be forgotten, aside from the fact that our writings are addressed only to those who want to read and understand them. We live in an age of confusion and thirst in which the advantages of communication are greater than those of secrecy; moreover only esoteric theses can satisfy the imperious logical needs created by the philosophic and scientific positions of the modern world.… Only esoterism…can provide answers that are neither fragmentary nor compromised in advance by a denominational bias. Just as rationalism can remove faith, so esoterism can restore it".

But apart from such considerations there are also intrinsic reasons why the truths expressed in this book should not remain hidden. "The paradox of esoterism is that on the one hand 'men do not light a candle and put it under a bushel' while on the other hand 'give not what is sacred to dogs'; between these two expressions lies the 'light that shineth in the darkness, but the darkness comprehended it not'. There are fluctuations here which no one can prevent".

Also to be considered is the fact that exoterism is not self-sufficing. "Exoterism is a precarious thing by reason of its limits or its exclusions; there arrives a moment in history when all kinds of experiences oblige it to modify its claims to exclusiveness, and it is then driven to a choice: escape from these limitations by the upward path, in esoterism, or by the downward path,

in a worldly and suicidal liberalism. As one might have expected, the civilizationist exoterism of the West has chosen the downward path, while combining this incidentally with a few esoteric notions which in such conditions remain inoperative".

The author then goes on to consider religion as a whole, throughout the cycle, in three successive ways: "If the average man or collective man were not passional, Revelation would speak the language of the Intellect and there would be no exoterism, nor for that matter esoterism considered as an occult department. There are here three possibilities: firstly, men dominate the passional element, everyone lives spiritually by his inward Revelations; this is the golden age in which everyone is born an initiate. Second possibility: men are affected by the passional element to the point of forgetting certain aspects of Truth, whence the necessity—or the opportuneness—of Revelations that while being outward are metaphysical in spirit, such as the *Upanishads.* Thirdly: the majority of men are dominated by passions, whence the formalistic, exclusive and combative religions, which on the one hand communicate to them the means of channeling the passional elements with a view to salvation, and on the other hand the means of overcoming it in view of the total truth, and of thereby transcending the religious formalism which veils it while suggesting it in an indirect manner. Religious revelation is both a veil of light and light veiled".

The following passage is also very relevant to this context: "The human individual has one great concern that exceeds all others: to save his soul; to do this, he must adhere to a religion, and to be able to adhere to it he must believe in it; but since, with the best will in the world, one can only believe what is credible, the man who knows to a sufficient degree two or more religions, and in addition has some imagination, may feel himself prevented from adhering to one of them because it presents itself dogmatically as the sole valid means of salvation; because it presents itself, in other words, as an absolute necessity, perhaps without offering in its characteristic formulation certain convincing and peace-giving elements that one may have found in other religions, and without being able to convince us that these elements and these religions are valueless. That the Psalms and the Gospel are sublime can be accepted without the least hesitation; but to believe that they contain in their very literalness, or in their psychological climate, everything that is offered by the *Upanishads* or the *Bhagavadgita* is a completely different question. In fact, sapiential esoterism —total and universal, not formalistic—can alone satisfy every legitimate mental need, its province being that of profound intentions and not that of expressions charged with prejudice; it alone can reply to all the questions raised by religious divergences and limitations, which amounts to saying that in the objective and subjective conditions that we have here in mind, it constitutes the only key that lets us understand a religion, leaving aside every question of esoteric realization. By the same token, integral esoterism can indicate what, in a given religion, is really fundamental from the metaphysical and mystical point of view—for mystical one may read alchemical or operative if one wishes—and consequently what permits it to rejoin the *religio perennis*".

With regard to "esoteric realization", which is implicit in what he has just called the "alchemical or operative" point of view, he has already defined it in some pages earlier as the

setting free of the Intellect: "Remove 'the rust…from the heart', and the Intellect will be released". He adds: "This release is strictly impossible—we must insist upon it—without the cooperation of a religion, an orthodoxy, a traditional esoterism with all this implies."

The question of realization, that is, of "esoterism as way", is never altogether absent, from one end of the book to the other; but part one, "*Sophia Perennis*", is in the main an unfolding of "esoterism as principle". The supreme point of reference is always that of non-dualism as formulated by the Hindu Advaitists and in particular by Shankara. The Sole Reality is *Atma*, the Transpersonal Self which, being Absolute, is also Infinite. "This Infinity implies Radiation, for the good tends to communicate itself as St. Augustine observed; the Infinity of the Real is none other than its power of Love". We are reminded here of the Islamic tradition: "I was a Hidden Treasure, and I wished to be known, and so I created the world". Since the Treasure is itself Infinite—namely That to which nothing can be added—the apparently separate existence of the universe is an illusion and the author reminds us that "the Hindu notion of 'Illusion', *Maya*, coincides in fact with the Islamic symbolism of the 'Veil', *Hijab*". The universal illusion is a veil which hides Reality, but it also has the power to "undelude"—that is its primal purpose, according to the words "I wished to be known"—and to reintegrate the knower into the Knowledge of the Truth, when it can be said, to quote the author: "The Veil has become Light, there is no longer any Veil". He follows this sentence with a formulation of the utmost importance: "There is nothing but Light; the Veils of necessity originate in the Light itself, they are prefigured in it. They do not come from its luminosity, but from its radiation; not from its clarity but from its expansion. The light shines for itself, then it radiates to communicate itself, and by radiating it produces the Veil and the Veils; by radiating and spreading out it creates separation, Veils, gradations. The intrinsic tendency to radiate is the first Veil, that which later defines itself as creative Being, and then manifests itself as cosmos. Esoterism or gnosis, being the science of Light, is thereby the science of veilings and unveilings, and necessarily so since on the one hand discursive thought and the language that expresses it constitute a veil, while on the other hand the purpose of this veil is the Light.

"God and the world do not mix; there is but one sole Light, seen through innumerable Veils; the saint who speaks in the name of God does not speak by virtue of a divine inherence, for Substance cannot be inherent in accidence; it is God who speaks, the saint being only a veil whose function is to manifest God, 'as a rarefied cloud makes the sun visible', according to a comparison used by Moslems. Every accident is a veil which makes visible, more or less indirectly, Substance-Light."

These quotations are taken from the second chapter which is on "The Mystery of the Veil" and which, by means of this great symbol, marvelously brings home to us the double nature of *Maya*. The veil is here considered in a multitude of aspects, not only as regards its substance—thickness or transparency or iridescence, for example—but also as regards its different modes of movement. Prolongations of the Veil such as the screen or the fan are also mentioned. The following passages can give only a meager idea of the wealth of this chapter as a whole.

“The Veil which opens gently indicates a welcome into some beatitude; the Veil which opens brusquely—or the rending of the Veil—means on the contrary a sudden *fiat lux,* a dazzling illumination, a *satori* as the Zen Buddhists would say, unless it signifies—on the Cosmic scale—*dies irae:* the unexpected irruption of a heavenly light that is both avenging and saving and ultimately equilibrating. As for the Veil which closes slowly, it does so charitably and without vigour; if on the contrary it closes abruptly, this indicates disgrace.”

The veil may be plain, or else a secondary element may be superimposed such as embroidery, ornamental weaving or decorative printing. “The veil thus enriched suggests the play of *Maya* in all its diversity and all its iridescence, as does also, with the accent on the unfolding, the mysterious plumage of the peacock, or as does a painted fan which on being opened displays its message and its splendor. The peacock and the fan are emblems or attributes of *Vishnu;* and it is especially worthy of note that the fan, in the Far East and elsewhere, is a ritual instrument which, like universal *Maya*, can both open and shut, manifest and reabsorb, revive and extinguish. The opening or unfolding, whatever be its image, is the projection of Existence, which manifests all virtualities; the shutting signifies reintegration in the Essence and return to potential plenitude; the play of *Maya is* a dance between Essence and Existence, Existence being the Veil, and Essence, Nudity. And Essence is inaccessible to the existent as such, as was said by the inscription on the statue of Isis at Sais: ‘I am all that has been, all that is, and all that will be; and no mortal has ever lifted my Veil’.”

A note on “the dance of the seven veils” introduces us to the symbolism of numbers, which is the theme of the next chapter. Just as relativity veils the Absoluteness of the Divine Truth, so multiplicity is a veil over Its One-and-Onliness. The author here expounds the significances, on both hypostatic and cosmic levels, of the numbers two to seven together with their geometrical equivalents, and his exposition is so instructive and so satisfying that more than one reader may regret that he does not take us as far as the number twelve. It could be said that thirteen is the first unsymbolic or ‘opaque’ number, the first which reveals nothing of what it hides. But seven marks the End of the Way; and the cycle which it closes, the whole process of outward-moving manifestation followed by inward-moving reintegration, is enough for the purpose of this book.

The final chapter of part one, “The primordial Tree”, throws light on many questions. How is it, for example, that the Paradise of Eden was lost to man, whereas no fear of loss can ever preoccupy him in the Paradise which he hopes to enter after death? A Christian will no doubt say that it is in virtue of the Redemption. Schuon’s answer could be said to include this implicitly, but it is of a far more universal scope. In other words, it is the answer of *Religio Perennis,* and as such it could be said to apply to all religions.

The second and longest part of the book is on “Spiritual and Moral Life”. Its opening chapter, “On the Triple Nature of Man” is prefigured in what has already been said of the significance of the ternary and the triangle, for man, made in the image of God, cannot but reflect the Three Divine Persons or Hypostases. Modern psychology treats the human being—soul and

body—as an independent and self-sufficient entity. Schuon here reaffirms the traditional concept with a view to the cultural formation of the modern reader, and in doing so he demonstrates among other things that far from being independent the soul depends on what lies "vertically" beyond it in the double dimension of height and depth. Man's intelligence proceeds from the Truth Itself, the Light behind the Veil. It can thus be said to transcend infinitely the human mind which is its lower extremity. Man's will, on the other hand, is rooted in the Divine Self. The Fall has not altered his constitution in these two respects. It has placed a barrier—what Schuon calls "a layer of ice"—between the lower and the higher reaches of intelligence and between the surface and the depths of the will; and "esoterism as way" is the most direct means of melting the ice and restoring to man his primordial heritage. As to the third element of his threefold nature, the soul itself or the psychic substance as such, its function is not to go beyond itself but to be open to the Transcendent by way of love.

"Man may know, will and love; and to will is to act. We know God by distinguishing Him from whatever is not He and by recognizing Him in whatever bears witness to Him; we will God by accomplishing whatever leads us to Him and by abstaining from whatever removes us from Him; and we love God by loving to know and to will Him, and by loving whatever bears witness to Him around us as well as in us."

To these three elements correspond doctrine, method and morals, or comprehension, concentration and conformation; and since the soul is inspired by its two sister faculties of intelligence and will, it may be said to have two aspects, namely faith by which, in assenting to the Truth, it conforms to the doctrine, and virtue by which, in prolonging the spiritual attitudes imposed by the will, it conforms to the method. On this basis the author now extends three to four and speaks of human nature as pointing in four directions.

"In seeking particularly adequate or suggestive terms to designate the spiritual dimensions of man, we might put forward the following quaternity: objectivity, inwardness, faith and virtue."

"Objectivity is the perfect adaptation of the intelligence to objective reality; and inwardness is the persevering concentration of the will on that 'Inward' which, according to Christ, coincides with the heart, whose door it is fitting to lock after having entered, and which opens onto the 'Kingdom of God', which in fact is 'within you'."

"And this needs a foundation of faith and virtue, of intensity and radiance, without which man, in the eyes of God, would not be man."

If the great short-coming of the modern psychologist is his failure to allow for the infinite scope of man's intelligence and will, the fault of the pseudo-mystic often lies in the opposite direction. There are some self-styled esoterists who imagine that everything can be achieved by these two faculties alone, that is, by comprehension and concentration, by doctrine and method, without any need for the soul to make an offering of itself in all its totality. The chapter on "The Virtues in the Way" dispels this illusion by showing the imperative need, not to acquire the

virtues, but to clear away the rubble of second nature, or fallen nature, which hides them, for they are already there, in our primal nature, to which the spiritual path is a return.

If the virtues in their fullness are an aspect of the end of the path, they are also, at a lesser degree of development, a necessary means to that end. The following passage is masterly in the most direct sense of this word:

"If we were asked—despite the evidentness of the thing—what virtue has to do with questions of spiritual realization, involving a rigorous and extra-individual technique, we would answer in the following manner, placing ourselves at the same strictly practical point of view. Spiritual realization imposes on the soul an immense disproportion owing to the fact that it introduces the presence of the sacred into the darkness of human imperfection; this inevitably provokes disequilibrium—producing reactions which in principle carry with them the risk of an irremediable fall, reactions which moral beauty, together with the graces which by its very nature it attracts, can largely prevent or attenuate. It is precisely this beauty that ambitious dilettantes without imagination think they can disdain, for they see in it only a sentimentalism foreign to what they believe to be a spiritual technique; nevertheless, when the soul finds itself suspended between two worlds, one already lost and the other not yet reached, only a fundamental virtue together with grace can save it from vertigo, and only this virtue immediately makes it immune to temptations and deviations." And he adds: "On this level of spiritual alchemy, it is important not to confuse a purely extrinsic morality with intrinsic virtue…nor a natural virtue of modest scope with a virtue profoundly rooted in the heart." We may also quote in this same context a passage from the chapter on "Sincerity": "One cannot subject oneself to a constraining ideal—or seek to transcend oneself for the sake of God—without bearing in one's soul what psychoanalysts call 'complexes'; this means in fact that there are complexes which are normal for a spiritual man or simply for a decent man, and that, conversely, the absence of 'complexes' is not necessarily a virtue, to say the least. Doubtless primordial man, or man deified, has no longer any complexes, but to have no complexes is not enough to make a man deified or primordial!"